

March 2012. European Lynx et al!

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Last Updated Saturday, 31 March 2012

A celebration of woodpeckers to begin the month, both Three-toed Woodpecker still present and the Black Woodpecker on the peanut feeders at Labanoras. Outshining both however, and the culmination of a multi-year search, a fabulous European Lynx impressed as it strolled across a forest track shortly before dark, three Raccoon Dogs seen the same evening. Late month, incoming migrants added to the mix - Common Cranes, White-tailed Eagles and Hen Harriers on my land at Labanoras, Marsh Harriers and Smew elsewhere.

1-2 March. A Celebration of Woodpeckers. A traditional late-winter/early spring upswing at the feeders brought plenty of birds - flocks of both Siskin and Greenfinches munching sunflower seeds in Vilnius, a couple of new Willow Tits on the nuts at Labanoras and, rather more notable for the feeders, my first Coal Tit for a couple of years, an energetic little individual flitting from feeder to feeder at Labanoras. Also still present, having barely moved from the same little quarter of forest, the super star Three-toed Woodpecker still hammering away on favoured alders and, at the feeders, the Black Woodpecker still enjoying the free offerings, some of the feeders now looking the worse for wear after his weeks of bashing! A celebration of woodpeckers, this winter's haul at the feeding stations: Grey-headed Woodpecker - once only at Labanoras, a male in late February. Black Woodpecker - three wintering on my land, a male unexpectedly taking to the feeders from early-February. White-backed Woodpecker - one male on the Labanoras feeders in January at least, seemed to vanish in February. A female arrived at the feeders from mid-March (see below). Great Spotted Woodpecker - about eight regular on the Labanoras feeders, up to five in the Vilnius garden. Middle Spotted Woodpecker - four on the Labanoras feeders, two in Vilnius. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker - occasional at Labanoras. Three-toed Woodpecker - a stunning male found in early January at Labanoras, present throughout until March. In the coming days and weeks, many of these should begin to disperse, the Three-toed Woodpecker probably departing, the melting of ice will leave its favoured locality inaccessible anyhow. 3 March. Lynx Bingo. Several times a year, when the desire for a night safari beckons, into the forests I go. Beasties big and small the quarry, past highlights have included Elk, Polecat and Wild Boar a plenty, plus occasional owls, but never has the real point of the travels revealed itself. With a national population of less than 50 animals, European Lynx is the Holy Grail of the mammals of Lithuania, not only rare, but highly secretive and nocturnal to boot. So it was, yet another night I had set aside, this time choosing an extensive belt of forest in the northern half of the country. Icy tracks cutting through forests still decked in snow, tracks of Elk, Red Deer and Roe criss-crossing the ways. I arrived some hours before sunset, a Black Woodpecker the only prize for my early arrival. And so the sun began to drop, the temperature dipped to just below freezing, my wanders of the tracks began. The pre-sunset period is usually quite fruitful, Roe Deer or Wild Boar often appearing on tracks, perhaps a Red Fox or two. Not so this day, I covered several kilometres without a single mammal appearing. Hmm, thought I, maybe a bad choice of location. Sliding rather much, I edge the car over a brow and onto a small track, deep forest to the right, a small clearing on the left. Light was beginning to fade a little, a mammal stepped out of the forest onto the track ahead, distance perhaps 150 metres. Stopped and swung the binoculars up, a heavy feline walking from right to left, bobbed tail, the typical head of Woh, European Lynx right in front of me!!! Not for long though, neither pausing nor speeding up, the Lynx walked straight across the track and down into the clearing opposite. And gone. Zipped up to the clearing, scanned in hope, but tangles of fallen trees, thickets and deep furrows, a thousand places for a Lynx to disappear into. I hung on till dark, but no further sign. Still, a European Lynx is a European Lynx, many years I have waited for this critter to show, I was ecstatic. Into the darkness I continued, a few kilometres of zigzagging along assorted tracks, three Raccoon Dogs emerged from the dark, one Red Fox too. I was not going to beat my sunset prize, so called it quits, my fourth cat in the Western Palearctic cat now safely under the belt. 5 March. Garden Flurries. Decorating the snow, a flurry of yellows descending, the Siskin flock now numbering 20 or so, Greenfinch near a dozen, sunflower seeds most popular. Peeping out from the bedroom window, neatly situated at ground level, it's eye to eye with these little characters, so too with a Great Spotted Woodpecker busily investigating fallen fat. One Willow Tit also in the garden, a nice compliment to the Marsh Tits, pair of Crested Tits and oodles of Blue and Great Tits. 10-11 March. Spring of Sorts. Gloom and murk, drizzle and sleet, a most unsavory mix of weather, the temperature hovering just above freezing adding little to mitigate. Nevertheless, with the snow in retreat, so arrived the first birds of spring - both at Labanoras, a steady trickle of Skylarks tootling over, churping and engaging in song, plus three Lapwings plodding around a pool of water sitting atop ice. Can't say I spent long in residence, but a nice collection for the day - six species of woodpecker, including a female White-backed Woodpecker at the feeders (first female this year), a pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers in display and the long-staying Three-toed Woodpecker still loyal to his favoured little patch. More engaging however, a Great Grey Shrike hunting at the feeders, lurking at the forest edge then swooping around after the tits flocking in. Two Willow Tits still with the masses, the Coal Tit too. In the Vilnius garden meanwhile, the finch flock continued to grow - Siskins and Greenfinches everywhere, plus one also Willow Tit here. 17-21 March. A Kaleidoscope of Sounds. The long winter months finally on the ebb, the virtual silences now shattered by birdsong galore. With the snow largely gone and a respectable 13 C marking the weekend, what a pleasure it was. Birds everywhere, the first major arrival of the year - at Labanoras, hundreds of Skylarks pouring north, flocks of Fieldfares too, Blackbirds in the forest, Grey Herons dropping into the colony.

Reduced intensity at the feeding station, but the din echoing from meadow and forest certainly compensated. Yodelling, drumming, trumpeting, chirping from all quarters. Leading the pack, Common Cranes in the meadows - a pair, a flock of four, two singles - certainly not vocally-challenged! Also in the orchestra, occasional peee-weeets from Lapwings, a constant musical backdrop of Skylarks, twitterings of Siskins, rude kronks of Grey Herons and mega-decibel White-backed Woodpecker drumming from the forest, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker adding a soft accompaniment, the other

woodpeckers throwing in their added extras.

And then an almighty yapping yodel, a White-tailed Eagle dropping into pines beyond my cabin. A good bird for my land, usually only one or two a year, so what was to follow was a treat indeed. From the forest emerged not one, but three adult White-tailed Eagles, a pair and an intruder, a good deal of argy bargy and noise till the undesired one finally lumbered off, the pair then engaging in full aerial display for some half an hour, repeatedly dropping back to the very same patch of trees. Just for added effect, in the midst of the action, also one rather stunning Goshawk.

Also of note, from the forest edge, where the undergrowth met the still frozen swampland, up flushed a Woodcock, only my third record on the land. Yay, spring is here, bring it on.

Back in the Vilnius area, Siskins climbed to a giddy 60 or so on the feeders, the first Chaffinches appeared and, a real treat, a Red Squirrel scampered in the pines out back. A little further afield, assorted ducks - Wigeon, Teal, Pintail, Tufted Duck et al - congregated on the first waters to lose their icy coas, while traditional meadows held flocks of Starlings and Lapwings the vanguards of an assault about to begin. 24-25 March. Spring Stumbling. After a week of moderate warmth, a slight crash in the temperatures - down to 7 C and sunny on the 24th, then a miserable 5 C on the 25th, with wind and rain adding to the joy. Still, the relentless march of spring pushed ever forward - Labanoras again providing most of the rewards. Amongst the highlights, one singing Woodlark, three pairs of Crane and, all in active migration, Chaffinches streaming north and skeins of White-fronted Geese overhead. The woodland, now a joy of bird song, boasted yet more new arrivals - Wrens and Song Thrush in full voice, a Wood Pigeon in low coo. Also a brave Small Tortoiseshell, my first butterfly of the year (other than a hibernating Small Tortoiseshell found in my house a couple of weeks earlier) and the first flowers poking through. Another good show of raptors too - after the White-tailed Eagles and Goshawk of the previous week, this weekend's little haul included another Goshawk, several Common Buzzards northbound, one Sparrowhawk and, pick of the day and not a species I see on my land every year, two smart Hen Harriers quartering the meadows - first a male, then a female half an hour later. Next day, in the rather disgusting weather, a very much car-based trip to the lakes at Elektrenai (still just about the only ice-free water in the area) produced a nice handful of birds to make it worthwhile - a possee of Smew, a good assortment of diving ducks, plenty of Cormorants and, my first of the year in Lithuania, Marsh Harrier and Great Crested Grebe. 29-31 March. Spring Plummet! And down tumbled the temperatures, back came the snow!!! A shocking end to the month, daytimes rising to a mere 2 or 3 C, nights a few degrees below freezing. However, a true treat to round the month off - joining a growing flock of finches at my Vilnius garden feeders, four super stunning Hawfinches. Though fairly regular in the garden every year from March onwards, this year's birds just oozed pure class as they popped down to the feeders outside the bedroom window. A pleasure indeed to wake and see Hawfinches a metre from your nose, mingling with about 100 Siskins, 20 or so Greenfinches and the usual assorted added extras, Willow and Crested Tits et al.